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Article

Social Media, Peer Surveillance, Spiritual Formation, and Mission: Practising Christian Faith in a Surveilled Public Space

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Abstract

Social media has become a part of everyday life, including the faith lives of many. It is a space that assumes an observing gaze. Engaging with Foucauldian notions of surveillance, self-regulation, and normalisation, this paper considers what it is about social and digital culture that shapes expectations of what users can or want to do in online spaces. Drawing upon a wide range of surveillance research, it reflects upon what “surveillance” looks like within social media, especially when users understand themselves to be observed in the space. Recognising moral panics around technological development, the paper considers the development of social norms and questions how self-regulation by users presents itself within a global population. Focusing upon the spiritual formation of Christian users (disciples) in an online environment as a case study of a community of practice, the paper draws particularly upon the author’s experiences online since 1997 and material from The Big Bible Project (CODEC 2010–2015). The research demonstrates how the lived experience of the individual establishes the interconnectedness of the online and offline environments. The surveillant affordances and context collapse are liberating for some users but restricting for others in both their faith formation and the subsequent imperative to mission.

1. Introduction

As digital technologies continue to make communication channels and platforms more ubiquitous and effortless, easy connection between human beings is greater than ever before. Social media (often referred to as social networking sites, or SNS) can be broadly defined as the websites and applications that enable users to create and share content with networks (i.e., friends, followers, and so on) they construct for themselves (Pittman and Reich 2016: 155). Social media has experienced a meteoric rise in popularity, providing a sense of community for individuals through online ties and networks. There are many diverse social media platforms available to the public, catering to both a broad public and niche, special interest groups, with the average number of social networks held by internet users growing from 4.3 in 2013 to 7.6 in 2017. One example of this is the social media giant Facebook, which now has ninety per cent of users using one of its four main services: Facebook, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, or Instagram. The main Facebook platform provides both personal space for individuals to connect with their own friends and families and public spaces, including pages and groups, that allow individuals to network with strangers with shared interests (Global Web Index 2017).

Social media spaces provide a free-at-the-point-of-use communication tool that develops relationships

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between friends and facilitates the development of online communities (Schriner 2017), including communities clustered around faith. As social media spaces develop in quantity and in density of usage, the threats as well as the benefits of these spaces also develop. Through their liminality, they can also become problematic, threatening, and dangerous spaces. The disembodied nature of online spaces, which allows users to perform their identity in a manner they choose and to protect their offline self from identification, can provide a fertile ground for anti-social behaviour such as racism and misogyny, known online as “trolling” (Yang et al. 2016). Further, online spaces have the potential to be used as sites of grooming vulnerable people for both online and offline criminal activity or to become spaces in which those intent on criminal activity can group together (Salter 2017).

In recognition of these potential threats, users of social media are by and large cognizant of the potential for, and indeed the utility of, surveillance in online spaces. Indeed Macnish (2014) describes the way in which the internet has given rise to the extension of powers of surveillance, with online technologies enabling greater possibilities for national surveillance activities, in both ease and reach. Social media users understand surveillance as being for the purposes of public safety and “a necessary concession in the fight against terrorism and a property of the world in which we live” (Brandon 2016: 101). It also offers opportunities to demonstrate that we are becoming fitter, healthier, and more productive. Surveillance can be attributed to less altruistic purposes, although social media users may not necessarily experience it negatively. This might include employers keen to maintain a positive social media presence or scoping out job applicants, journalists looking for the next hot story, or researchers intending to inform and develop social theory (Spicer 2017). It may also include surveillance of religious behaviours, including the use of facial recognition technology regarding church attendance (Solon 2015) or software such as X3watch (X3Watch, n.d.) started by church pastors in 2002, designed to enable men to live “porn-free lives” through accountability partners. A significant number of “lurkers” are also understood to be present throughout online social media spaces—those members of the spaces that read contributions but do not contribute (Sun, Rau, and Ma 2014). Surveillance is therefore understood to be a normal feature of online interactions.

Two main aspects frame this paper. First, this paper seeks to question and explore the nature of online surveillance of social media, recognising that the digital is powerful and ubiquitous in contemporary society, although it is often described as “revolutionary” and “different.” The paper starts from Foucault’s concept of the panopticon and his associated theorisation of self-regulation and normalisation. Surveillance is often depicted as dystopian by default: this paper considers whether it can be benign or even, as defined by Stoddart (2014), an “act of care.”

Second, the paper moves on to explore the ways that users who are part of a wide community of practice (CoP) interact with and within online spaces. The paper recognises active Christians as a CoP (or looser network of practice) as identified by Lewis and Rush (2013: 2), drawing upon Wenger: “a group of practitioners who interact with each other to share their expertise about some aspect of their practice.” It considers how the knowledge of online surveillance, particularly by peers, affects the faith formation and practice of Christian users, including the practice of mission. Alongside a wide range of theoretical literature, the paper draws upon the author’s experiences online since 1997, including research with The Big Bible Project (CODEC 2010–15), with ideas triggered by a short survey conducted amongst my online networks (Lewis 2017b). Christians are a particularly interesting case study regarding behavioural surveillance, as they are sometimes described as the “face of God” in the world (Byers 2013a) and have often been held to a higher moral standard offline (Welch, Tittle, and Grasmick 2006). More widely, the paper focuses upon the interactions between online and offline and the affordances and constraints of social media and challenges everyday beliefs in technological determinism.

2. Surveillance: The Concept

Foucault (1977) described the potential for self-policing citizens using the metaphor of the panopticon. The panopticon described a prison design originally suggested by the English theorist Jeremy Bentham in

the late eighteenth century (Kotsopolous 2010: 130). The panopticon design consisted of buildings surrounding a courtyard within which stood a central tower. The position of the tower and the surrounding buildings meant that inmates of the cells were visible to an observer in the tower, whilst the observer was not visible to the inmates. The surveillance was therefore theoretically continuous, and in this model of prison architecture the inmates would be required to behave as if they were being watched regardless of whether an observer was in the tower. As with “Big Brother” and the “Thought Police” in Orwell’s (Orwell [1949] 2003: 5) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, they would not know when they were not being watched and had to live in the assumption that every sound could be heard and every movement scrutinised.

People of faith live in this assumption that a higher power is watching. Indeed religion can be used as a form of panopticon to control people’s (moral) behaviour, whilst “God looks at the heart” (Yngvesson, quoted in Lewis 2017c). Foucault’s metaphor was developed to describe the potential for social order in a system in which the threat of observation and reprimand is used to promote good citizenship. This is a model of control that might be easily applied to engagement with social media. The internet presents the epitome of a space in which users know that they might be observed without being able to identify the observer. This surveillance might be in the form of a formal crime prevention authority but most often is experienced through more benign surveillance practices by friends, strangers, and group administrators. It seems impossible to talk about surveillance without drawing upon Foucault, although Barker and Jane (2016: 103) describe the panopticon’s legacy as being philosophical rather than architectural. They (ibid.) question why we opt-in to “such intense scrutiny and surveillance,” although users often appear to forget that there is ongoing and often continuous surveillance of online social media spaces, as we question what constitutes “good digital citizenship.”

Foucault’s theorisation about surveillance is predominantly presented as dystopic and unidirectional, but when he generalises his theory of panoptic power to society as a whole, this is seen as being democratically controlled, enabling “everyone to come and observe any of the observers” (Foucault 1977: 207), effectively a democratisation of fear. Whilst Foucault moved beyond individual bodies to regulating whole populations, Bentham saw the panopticon as a transitional phase, to be discarded when no longer needed. The vision of Bentham, the original architect of the theoretical panopticon, was not of a site of constant surveillance but of a space in which prisoners might believe that they were being constantly monitored. Rather than creating a “society of control” in which people would be continuously watched physically, his idea was that discipline would be internalised as a feeling or sense of being watched, thus eventually exhausting the need for any “real” watching at all. In fact, Bentham’s creation was inspired by a desire to address a variety of social and economic problems such as over-use of incarceration. With liberation from physical coercion, surveillance would eventually not be required. According to Bentham’s utilitarian philosophy, the panopticon represented an approach to achieving “the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people,” albeit one in which the body was not imprisoned, although the mind might be. He viewed the concepts as a template that could be adapted to other aspects of society. For example, Bentham considered the applicability of the concepts to the uptake of rules amongst those voluntarily entering new spaces, which now include the digital (Galič, Timan, and Koops 2017: 14).

The panopticon was not Foucault’s sole tool in his proposed regulation and formation of a compliant citizen. Rather, Foucault posited that individuals will seek to act within predetermined social norms. According to Foucault, discourses are historically specific, and individuals or subjects will therefore behave in a particular manner or present themselves in a way that is consistent with the way in which knowledge is produced at that given point in time. Individuals therefore learn to think, act, and communicate within preconceived social norms, defining for themselves what knowledge and practice is appropriate or not appropriate for that given context. Therefore, Foucault argued that whilst society defines “normal,” individuals will strive to regulate and present themselves in a manner that sits comfortably within the social definition of normal. For example, within wartime society, ideals of citizenship defined what was “normal:” it would be unusual not to want to be fit, healthy, and prepared to die for your country, with these ideals depicted through both word and image (Lewis 2004: 27–30). Words and images frame the expectations for behaviour within those spaces, with “language ... not a neutral way

of describing the world and objects which exist in it,” but our understanding of existing only through the categories and concepts we use to describe them (Blair, Dawtrey, and Holland 1994: 24). The visual is a recognisable element of language and discourse, with access to images and familiarity with them culturally based, defining and producing ideas of “truth” and knowledge that govern at any given time “what is valid, sayable, and possible.” This will, according to Foucault, include the lens through which individuals determine whether something is forbidden or permitted. The ubiquity of what we are engaging with is difficult to recognise, because these systems often remain hidden or unnoticed, because they are normalised within daily life, making them powerful and difficult to challenge (Lewis 2004: 27–30).

Within the disciplinary society, power is dispersed and hidden in processes of conformity present in different places of society, functioning through different institutions. Whilst Foucault was talking about normalisation at a national level as a response to rationalities of governance, when considering online spaces, we might consider normalcy and expected behaviours to differ with the differing identity of online spaces. Normation processes constitute what one has to conform and strive for, measured against a fictional norm: to be “normal” is to be “invisible” in terms of blending in rather than “abnormal” in a deficient way (Galič, Timan, and Koops 2017: 17).

The pressure to conform comes from various institutions, and one of the most powerful institutions of a digital age is Google, which seeks to “organise all the world’s information,” shaping what is contemporary knowledge via algorithms. Google has become so naturalised, “it no longer seems to have an origin. It’s as if it always was—and therefore always will be—a part of us” (Hillis, Petit, and Jarrett 2012: 3). With over six billion search entries a day, Google is used as the default search engine by over seventy-seven per cent of internet users (Allen 2017). Google’s knowledge is shaped via human-written algorithms: it shapes the world’s knowledge as its results define what is normal for users. As Graham and Sengupta (2017) highlight, however, the content and search algorithms reflect a geographical and gendered bias more widely recognisable offline: reflecting rich, western, and male privilege. Early optimism about the revolutionary potential of the internet may have been misplaced, as we brought many “habits, inclinations and prejudices... endemic to society as a whole,” and it is now “its mundane nature and pervasiveness that now gives the internet its significance” (Miller 2011: 1).

Campbell (2012) establishes how academic interest in digital religion has also shifted from studying the internet as an isolated phenomenon to understanding it as a ubiquitous part of everyday life, including the religious aspects of life. Campbell and Garner (2016: 2) further develop the concept of “networked theology,” an “approach to theologizing about the digital, technological, and network society in which we live,” focusing on the “ethical impact of our technological engagement on our perception of what it means to be human.” Having established the concept of surveillance, we now move on to consider if it can be benign.

3. Surveillance: Can It Be Benign?

Dystopian and dark types of surveillance analysis are particularly present amongst post-structuralist and post-Marxist scholars from Deleuze (1992) to Galloway (2004), but another branch has emerged in contemporary surveillance studies. Haggerty and Ericson (2000) introduce more neutral and sometimes even empowering accounts related to systems of watching and being watched. Technological developments and the networked nature of social media mean that the methods, tools, and technologies of surveillance are not exclusively in the hands of power-hungry institutions, companies, or governments. Deleuze’s (1992: 4) reasoning may suggest that corporations are now the main surveilling actor, with users having limited understanding of how the technologies they use daily work, but individuals can at least to some extent resist and refuse in the provision of their data. Unlike the panopticon, where one overseer looks at many, most social media technologies follow the logic of “many look at many,” although this is recognisable from most totalitarian regimes (driven by the logic of everyone being an informer), including Nazi Germany and the Gestapo, that Orwell drew upon in 1949 in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Giroux 2014). Within social media, visibility is often deliberately chosen through platforms

such as YouTube (Galič, Timan, and Koops 2017: 29). In that vein, Albrechtslund (2008) coined the term “participatory surveillance,” in which users are not only actively engaged in surveillance themselves as watchers, but they also participate willingly and consciously in the role of watched. Beliefs, ideas, and opinions are shared on social networking sites, where the idea of being seen and “followed” is an essential element rather than a problematic one. Whitson (2013: 170) defines the even more active term of self-surveillance (which others refer to as *sousveillance*), a term that has since grown with more recent developments in wearable computing, including cycle helmet cameras worn as an “insurance tool” (Cunningham 2018). Referring to Albrechtslund, Whitson (2013: 170) argues that this concept allows for a user-centred perspective on surveillance, rather than a top-down or institutional analysis, with users able to choose what information they share. As Barker and Jane (2016: 446) note, “we no longer live in a time where governments can exercise a top-down approach to pre-vetting all media content and acting as all-seeing gatekeepers,” so we need to self-regulate in concerns for privacy in an environment where visibility is actively sought.

As Kotsopolous (2010: 260) expresses, “contemporary society has already shown that individuals at all levels of society have the potential to engage in surveillance” and are able to move from being the observed to being the observer of their own and others’ practices, much enabled by technology. Galič, Timan, and Koops (2017: 23) highlight that if surveillance functions as a “positive act of self-regulation and community care, in which good citizens of the internet support each other in positive engagement,” then “surveillance,” which is more an act of controlling power than simply an act of looking, may not be the correct term. Social media and digital practices appear to have allowed two-way observation rather than being entirely negative. Collister (2014: 337), also drawing upon Albrechtslund, argues that surveillance practices in online social networking move beyond the passive with users as active agents, empowered by new ways of constructing identity, meeting friends, and socialising.

Albrechtslund (2008) notes that the digital traces so freely left by users, including pictures, statements, location, and whom they are with, may affect both present and future, as the “digital persona” cannot be deleted. Those traces can be reconstructed in new ways through databases independent of our plans for self-preservation (Tække 2011: 446). Online social networking spaces are consumer spaces, in which we are encoded as data profiles and our identities fragmented (including religious aspects) by digital categorisation, sometimes in ways we are unaware of, as the Cambridge Analytica scandal demonstrated (Hindman 2018). Accordingly, whilst it is argued that we are given the illusion of self-control through self-tracking health apps, we are actually being tracked and traced in the background as governments and companies push the responsibilities back onto individuals via “nudging” apps. The panopticon seems to be a fitting metaphor, as users internalise “doing good” through the prompts to disciplined behaviour via the surveillant assemblages of digital devices (Galič, Timan, and Koops 2017: 29).

“Surveillant assemblages” are defined by Haggerty and Ericson (2000) as the way that discrete items work together for the purposes of surveillance, not requiring a central panopticon, but with data collected from multiple places to create a personal profile, a virtual data double. Machines are required to collect data on a scale impossible for humans, and those data flows can then be governed, commercialised, and controlled. Whilst we are the subject of surveillance, we are also surveilling others through our own devices or what we are sharing about them in our interactions in our personal and public profiles, challenging others’ notions of privacy. The continuing development of mobilised technologies such as Google Glass has repercussions regarding our expectations about being observed and recorded, potentially driving social and political change, as we see a world both augmented and mediated by technology (Mann and Ferenbok 2013: 24). As facial recognition technologies have entered the mainstream through filters on apps such as Snapchat and with the most recent iPhone using these for logging in, they gain a benign and playful sense, moving from “hard” to “soft” technology which feels less threatening and less subject to critique than most identification equipment (Whitson 2013: 164).

Turning to the specific focus of the paper, the church could also be considered one of the early spaces of surveillance. A local priest would observe local communities formally within confession in the Roman

Catholic Church in which an unseen (but known) representative of the church takes the secrets that are shared and informally by observing attendance or other public behaviour although the priest could of course also be seen (Mathiesen 1997: 223). Within theological thinking on surveillance, panoptic models influence the thought of God watching over us from on high, sometimes quoting the psalmist: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (Psalm 139:1–7, New International Version). Stoddart (2014) notes that much as it “may be an act of care, it is also a powerful disciplinary mechanism” and can be evidenced as an “oppressive, catch-you-out gaze.” The panoptic model is one that the church has copied and supports within the “state’s surveillance of the (dangerous) Other,” encouraging transparency rather than privacy in a way that can be seen negatively, such as through data gathering about attendance or “accountability software” that voluntarily reports a user’s internet activity to a designated person. Theological values of “interdependence and openness to others,” however, encourages sharing which enables users to see some acts of surveillance “as a good and necessary act of care.” Yngvesson (Lewis 2017c) notes that where surveillance is used as a bridging mechanism, this creates a healthy community, whilst when used in a demanding and exclusive way, it becomes unhealthy. This paper will return to further theological considerations regarding surveillance and social media, but first considers the affordances and constraints of social media, as space for sharing, connecting, and engaging, with an expectation that one’s actions will be observed.

4. Social Media: Behaviour in a Space of Surveillance

Marder et al. (2016: 582) note that social media, including sites such as Facebook, are so ubiquitous that “they have radically altered the nature and scope of social interaction for their users.” SNS offer opportunities for self-presentation with a multitude of functions for developing online personas. Information on these sites is disclosed publicly whether that is the global public or a more limited network of connected “friends.” Roles may appear to be flattened, with social media using terminology such as “friends,” but hierarchies reappear and are reinforced through the structure of SNS (Marwick 2012: 379). Social media assumes an observing gaze. It is a public arena, and even those aspects that are “private” and peer-to-peer are “performed” for another, if not the mass audience that is assumed for all social media. The visible networked nature of SNS means that anonymity is low, with information able to reach multiple audiences simultaneously, including friends, family, work colleagues, and other members of the congregation, within a setting of context collapse, rather than within the strictly bounded contexts that were previously possible to erect between different audiences (boyd 2013). Marder et al. (2016: 582) argue that these affordances of SNS have produced a “chilling effect” (already well-researched offline), making users much more cautious about how they present themselves, aligning it with “impression management,” a concept familiar from organisational behaviour studies since the 1950s. In order to suit this wide range of potential audiences, self-representation online is managed through self-censorship alongside removal strategies such as deleting or de-tagging. Marder et al. were particularly interested in how far the ubiquitous presence of digital cameras and image posting on social networks were constraining the behaviour of people offline in order that activities would not appear online, including the choice of songs listened to, films watched, and items bought, as the software is so interconnected.

In some respects, we understand that self-presentation has always happened in public spaces, including for Christians: think of the notion of dressing in “Sunday best” for church or seeking to appear pious in front of the local priest (Mathews and Linehan 1995-98). We need to be wary of falling into technological determinism as an explanation in which technology establishes what is possible (Mackenzie and Wajcman 1985). Goffman (1959) described self-presentation as a theatrical performance, with identities being performed differently depending upon the audience being addressed. He gives a sense of being able to “relax” and “unmask” when one moves from “front stage” (public) to “backstage” (private), with the mask “the self we would like to be” (ibid.: 19) and that we become ourselves through series of performances. Lawler (2014: 120), however, argues that many of the different roles are performed as different parts of “ourselves” and are largely unconsciously performed but are “done for the benefit of the social group of which we are a part—whether or not there is anyone actually there to witness us.” Interaction provides “social binding.” Social media itself can be used differently with different connections, “with privacy

settings allowing access to different levels of information, while the public parade of connections offers social identity and status” (Lewis 2014a: 106). Within social media, as if on stage, we perform who we are daily, through our choice of user names, profile pictures, and emoticons and avatars (Ranzini 2014: 3).

Much research on surveillance and social media focuses on the difference between online and offline friendships, which, despite common negative media tropes, is not inherently negative. Westcott and Owen (2013: 311) sought to discover the ways that Twitter can facilitate friendship and generate relationship trust, often through a form of surveillance screening in which potential friends are observed before connecting in a deeper way. Marwick (2012: 379) identifies how users, whilst presenting their own data, are consuming the profiles and status updates of others as a form of social surveillance, informing the choices they will make about their own interactions, in accordance with social norms. Social media comes with an expectation of 24/7 always-on communication, with the need to publicly post personal information in order to appear up-to-date and digitally literate, in ways that Elmer (2013: 3) describes as “exceptionally bland and repetitive.” Within Facebook, users are typically tied to real names, but posts are not fully public, whilst on other platforms, users can post publicly, but anonymously. Users are not limited to the written word but can share with video, image, and audio content that accompanies a profile page (Seargeant and Tagg 2014: 92).

The panopticon makes all inmates in a prison equally visible, but within Facebook the EdgeRank algorithm does not automatically give equal visibility to all users. Most SNS seek to monetise the content on their platforms, with “a large, active, and demographically interesting user base ... usually a platform’s most precious asset” (van Dijck 2013: 36). Within this environment, visibility is not ubiquitous but scarce, because of the volume of content. “Being seen” on social media is a goal of most users, but despite the social narrative of Facebook offering visibility to all, there are some people who are far more visible than others. Other users struggle and fail to make themselves visible, especially if they are not prepared to pay for advertising space or paid search results. SNS monetise users’ data in other ways, developing huge datasets on human behaviour. Butcher (2012: 1165) notes that Facebook’s generic template structure for its user profiles is designed to make “the structured organization of individuals’ data easier and more manageable.” Social media companies and app developers are collecting massive datasets. Users are willing participants, but there are questions as to how much they understand the systems they are engaging with and what the developers intend to do with the data. Digital information can be cheaply replicated and shared, and with cheap transmission and storage costs, it can be hard to delete information once released (Bossewitch and Sinnreich 2012: 226), even if users later decide that they want to retract the information they originally desired to make visible. Having considered some of the affordances and constraints shaping online behaviour, we look more specifically at how it enables sharing and connecting.

5. Social Media: Sharing and Connecting

As the previous section demonstrates, social surveillance differs from the power-based surveillance enshrined in Foucault’s panopticon model. Marwick (2012: 380) identifies that surveillance is “consensual partly because people are motivated by social status, attention, and visibility to broadcast personal details about themselves to an audience,” choosing what to disclose and reveal as appropriate. She notes that power flows through all social relationships and between individuals rather than “between structural entities and individuals” (391). It is important that we understand that social media is not just a virtual space, disconnected from life. It needs to be judged on its own terms: “even though in practice, face-to-face communication can, of course, be angry, negligent, resistant, deceitful and inflexible, somehow it remains the ideal against which mediated communication is judged as flawed” (Livingstone 2009: 26).

Within the church this is particularly strong, with the notion of “God become flesh” and a particular focus on embodiment and embodied interactions (Byers 2013b). Leaning (2009: 55) identifies how in the early years of the internet, a huge amount of early research concentrated on online identity. It was heavily focused on the loss of face-to-face clues, deceit, and the concept of “disinhibition”: when technology allows people to say and do things online that they would not otherwise say or do, because they have lost

the clues of the face-to-face feedback cycle. Trottier (2012: 5) similarly notes how in the early years with bulletin boards, the digital was treated as distinct from the offline world. In 2001, Google bought the DejaNews archive of Usenet, and privacy and anonymity had to be renegotiated as content leaked across online spaces. As more global options emerged, connectivity became framed as risk, with child predators presented as a real danger and as a reason to police the spaces, especially once MySpace took social media mainstream.

Hess (2014) sums up how social networks have increasingly connected people in different spaces, making it difficult to disconnect without a lot of work. In the early years there was a concern that people would create multiple personas online and lose touch with their “real” selves. Hess ascertains that digital spaces now require a demonstration of personal integrity across multiple communities or credibility is lost, with trust “one of the most important currencies of this new environment” built “through transparency and consistency” (14). Young people in particular are often seen as digitally savvy, monitoring friends’ pages to ensure fair representation and trusting “each other not to expose silly or embarrassing pictures” (Lewis 2014a: 108). They can be described as “digital natives,” a term Marc Prensky popularised in 2001, referring to those who had grown up surrounded by technology. As Lewis (2014a: 62) writes:

A more useful idea has developed from a team at Oxford University led by Dave White: that of the “digital resident” and the “digital visitor,” defined more by attitude than by age. “Visitors” use the internet as a tool: go in to complete a task and leave. “Residents” regard themselves as members of communities that exist online, rather than having access to an online toolbox.

People use a multiplicity of services, each explicitly built around sharing and soliciting more and more information: where online spaces used to be a refuge from scrutiny, people now go offline for respite from visibility (Trottier 2012: 6). Aiken (2016: 51) notes that around forty per cent of daily speech is typically taken up with self-disclosure, but that this increases to eighty per cent online. Most interactions online are still regulated by power relations and social thinking that exist offline, whilst online and offline life become more interdependent (Ranzini 2014: 3).

As humans have always done, users watch others for behavioural norms online and adjust their own behaviours, with all users adjusting to the etiquette in the new online spaces not necessarily consciously. Online, as offline, most people want to be liked, with the desire for social approval fundamental to the human condition, reflected in the ways we engage online. Turkle (2011) famously said, “I share, therefore I am,” where she was referring to “the photoshopped self,” a deliberately created online self in which we share only those things that make us look good, part of a crowd, or that are easy to share, taking little time to think. The rapidity with which we can post things online means that we may not always engage with a mature and socialised brain, responding with a reflex action (Krotoski 2017). Bloggers “frequently write about their faith practices by chronicling their spiritual journey” (Campbell and Garner 2016: 68), and von Benzon (2018) argues that blogs are a space in which self-presentation can be less rushed and therefore more polished. As “we exhibit different ‘social selves’ in different situations, and the online environment is simply another social situation in which we are learning what is appropriate to share and what would be better reserved for a different social situation or a different technological medium” (Lewis 2014b: 281). Whilst users may be able to control their own privacy settings, they cannot control those of their peers or of the services that they are using, which may give away information such as political affiliations and sexual orientation through the friends and groups made visible by some social networks (Trottier 2012: 22). Having established that social media forms a significant part of our lives and having seen how it shapes aspects of our behaviour, we return to the empirical focus of this paper: to consider how social media surveillance interacts with Christian spiritual formation and mission.

6. Social Media: Spiritual Formation and Practice

A number of writers draw upon the trope of Romans 12:1–2 in defining spiritual formation, including Burer (2009), noting that the individual believer must have made a conscious choice and that “it involves

the inner person in that it concerns itself with character, thoughts, intentions, and attitudes more than actions, habits, or behaviours,” in line with the character of Christ. Collicutt (2015: 3–12) indicates that the term can be problematic, as it can be seen as “breaking users” and “squeezing people into a specific mould.” She notes that, essentially, it is about God working in the life of the Christian, both individually, and corporately, creating communities characterised by “peace, justice and social inclusion,” featuring personal, collective and interpersonal transformation for the *Missio Dei* of the world. Rogers (2018: 14) writes that the church is not an institution but a community “doing life” with God, and that “a community where people think they have to be perfect from the word go breeds a culture of projection and protectionism.” *The Message* (Peterson 2005: 213) translation of Romans 12:1–2 calls people to take their “everyday, ordinary life...plac[ing] it before God as an offering,” whilst not becoming “so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.” Lewis (2014b: 280) argues, “Disciples [followers of Jesus] keen to engage modern culture need to understand how to exist in, listen, read, and speak into the digital age: being immersed in the culture but also acting as a change agent within that culture.”

Hess (2014: 17) mentions those who would argue that faith formation must be embodied, so digital cannot be, but this is a wider reflection of arguments from the church that God came to earth in human form, and therefore incarnation must mean embodiment, although religious environments themselves are not always relational and embodied. One of the key aspects of faith formation is the expectation that spending time with God in Bible study, prayer, and worship will influence how Christians behave, and it is now possible to do aspects of these activities digitally. The Big Bible Project (CODEC 2010–15) demonstrated how “digital disciples” were able to access Christian resources, build up personal relationships, share the challenges of life, be challenged in their thinking, and how much of this was permeable between online and offline; whilst those with physical disabilities unable to physically attend typical spaces of spiritual development such as a church highlighted how digital resources and relationships have enhanced their lives. Hess (2013: 15) argues that there needs to be a recognition that however carefully faith formation environments are created, including the digital, they are part of a sinful and broken world so bring those challenges with them.

In Williams’s (2015: 377) research, fifty-two per cent of those using social media joined an online religious group of some form, and users became more trusting of the people with whom they interacted, drawing emotional support, companionship, and instrumental help, indicating that online community is demonstrably “a valid form of community.” Musters (2017), who also draws on Romans 12:1–2, argues in her book for a greater need for vulnerability, for more “real people,” for “taking off the mask” within church cultures, as wearing a “mask” and feeling a need to perform for social acceptability all the time is awkward, exhausting, and unfulfilling. Most of her arguments focus on the offline church, one in which people still do not feel safe to be themselves, as previous life experiences and a fear of rejection have wired people with a need to try to meet other people’s expectations. She discusses how being a child of God should be freeing from social expectations, allowing Christians to be honest, authentic, and different, resisting the “shiny veneer” that many users project on Facebook. A 2017 Facebook conversation with a previous contributor to The Big Bible Project (not a minister) questioned how being surveilled online affects behaviour:

Does social media affect that? Certainly. Depending how we use it. Do we use it to explore how to do love and faith better or do we use it to justify where we are now (the latter being more stifling to growth and formation I suspect). In terms of being watched, the most interesting aspect I think is the being watched not by the outsiders but by the insiders. So my online identity has in the past been defined by how the churchgoers at the place I attended viewed how I should be rather than the reality of who I am and who I believe I am meant to be.

Lomborg and Ess (2012: 177–79) discuss the use of Facebook by a Danish pastor, in which he has to be aware that all his network connections have equal access to his profile and posts. Offline, within the Christian sector, religious leaders have always had to be aware that they are visible, with the “dog collar”

worn as a public statement of being officially “on duty,” but with the knowledge that observers would still know what the public role is even when “off duty.” A quote that appears frequently on Facebook, commonly attributed to Eugene Peterson, states that “No life of faith can be lived privately. There must be overflow into the lives of others.” Similarly, the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC) has called for “whole-life discipleship” since the early 1990s in which disciples seek to take their faith into their everyday lives. Social media is merely the newest “secular” (non-religious) space. The nature of social media means that all declared Christians then have a level of visibility as the “face of God” whether explicitly talking about their faith or simply engaging with any other aspect of their online lives. As Lewis (2017a) wrote: “We need to be part of people’s everyday conversations and not just arriving when we have a message to ‘sell’. Sharing our everyday lives, in which stories of humour and vulnerability are particularly powerful, allows us to connect...” Social media is thus the latest space in which to be a visible “person of faith,” assuming that one does not live in countries such as North Korea, Somalia, and Afghanistan, where Christianity is illegal (Weber 2017).

Harrison (2017) identifies that those brought up with religious observance in childhood are more likely to retain their faith into adulthood. *Youth and Children’s Work* magazine, “Faith at Home: 2016–17” (Premier Christian Media Trust 2017), encouraged Christian parents to live out and model a daily relationship with God to their children. The magazine highlights a question about whose role this is, with many seeing discipleship as something expected to be taught by “experts” from “within the church” through teaching and small groups, whilst others see a wider community of family and friends who share their lives and encourage each other. Grandparents would previously have been another group for children to observe and imitate, but typically live further away than in the past. Skype and texting remove the need for geographic proximity and give children the opportunity to learn from grandparents again (Deprez 2017: 110–112). As Stoddart (Lewis 2017c) pointed out, social media and apps can also be used to prompt spiritual practices, monitor progress, and share insights. Most of the individual users’ activities on apps are not visible to others without a specific decision from the user, although as Lawler (2014) noted, earlier interaction and sharing provide “social binding.” Others would criticise the “performance” of a life of faith online, drawing upon Matthew 6:6, in which Christians are encouraged to pray in secret, rather than to be “seen by others.” On YouVersion, a Bible reading app, it asks if users want their friends to observe their activity. The company’s attempt, however, to introduce accountability partners in 2014, in which users would help each other keep their commitment to Bible reading, did not work (Hutchings 2017: 210), which is an example of the limitations that Kimmons et al. (2017: 639) refer to as the “acceptable identity fragments” religious users will share with their “imagined audience” on Twitter. This is something that Rodogno (2012) examines more widely in relation to personal identity online.

Developing on Goffman’s ideas of performativity, Schmalzbauer (2002: 169–70) interviewed Roman Catholic and evangelical journalists and found a number who either refused to identify publicly as “of faith” or limited their use of religious language, because it did not fit well with their public role. Lewis (2014c; 2014d) took this into a discussion of the “photoshopped self” and the place of “faith in the public square” online. At the Christian New Media Conference, one of the questions after Dawn and Lewis’s paper (2010) was whether Christians should have duplicate social media accounts, differentiating their Christian and secular content. This raised questions of where this need for separate identities comes from, and whether it is influenced by religious or social practices that are deemed acceptable. Interactions online are performed daily and are still regulated by the power relations that exist offline (Ranzini 2014: 3). As Voelz (2012: 123) says, “we can put whatever version of us on display that we wish,” and the paper now considers what “self” a Christian might expect to project as a form of mission.

7. Social Media: Mission as a Practice of Surveillance

Alongside personal faith formation, Christian disciples are called to be witnesses in the world, and Byers (2013a: 196) argues that if we are “the means by which God communicates and reveals himself through his Spirit, then our blog posts, status updates, tweets, artistic images, and online comments should be products of a life transformed by Christ and indwelt by his Spirit.” Smith (2015) identifies church as

moving beyond membership to encouraging those who attend to live full lives of discipleship, seeking to bring people back to their connection with God by encouragement and example. Churchgoing is no longer the “cultural norm” for most: “people don’t actively ignore the church: they don’t even think about it,” but they are observing what their friends are engaging with and sharing online (Lewis 2013). In 2013, Rev Robb Sutherland, on The Big Bible Project, described becoming comfortable in a “digital skin” that was consistent with his physical presence. Williams (CODEC 2015: 376) questions whether social media presents a distorted reality or whether it creates “relationships that allow the opportunity for spiritual formation and growth.”

Keeble (2017), who has spent the last thirty years living in a deprived urban community, discusses his concept of “Mission With,” as living amongst and alongside people as witnesses. Incarnation is seen as “presence among,” living amongst others rather than inviting “them” to come to “us.” He also draws upon Romans 12 and notes that living within a community, one must be oneself, building relationships without necessarily explicit evangelism but bringing the distinctive and transformative “salt and light” of your faith into the world (Matthew 5:13–16, NIV). He highlights the importance of living amongst people rather than protecting yourself behind walls, undertaking daily life alongside people, working with people where they are rather than trying to get them into specific practices and buildings where the church typically “lives.” Relationships of respect and friendship are built where seeking to turn the conversation in the direction of belief is seen as dishonest, but “our lives are watched and our faith is seen to be put into practice” (Keeble 2017: 102), and every interaction will add up in the minds of others as they watch Christians in their visible daily living. A message of faith cannot just be dropped in, and the credibility of years of involvement cannot be compensated for in other ways, but a fascination with the way one lives leads to “always be[ing] prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15, NIV). Towards the end, Keeble (2017: 219) notes “this requires us to be where people are, to be observable and in daily relationship, with personal mission praxis in ordinary life flowing from our ‘presence among’.”

As noted earlier, for billions in a “digital age” where people are, where people ask theological questions (Stoddart 2012: 63), and where people form and develop relationships includes social networks, which can be “more deeply embodied and relational than an ‘in-person’ space” (Hess 2014: 18). Much of what Keeble writes about “Mission With” in an urban context makes sense for a “presence among” the world online, where rather than “selling Jesus,” users are “being Jesus” in the way that they live their lives amongst their friends. When we consider what is (not) possible online, “we need to be careful not to judge online communities against standards that our offline communities can’t live up to either” (Hutchings 2015: 154). As Stoddart (2015: 26) notes from a World Communications Day speech of Pope Francis in 2014: “those who communicate, in effect, become neighbours,” as the geographical limits have been removed. If Christians are sharing their engagement with church activities within a personalised context, and alongside the rest of their shared lives, then that “fascination” that Keeble refers to can draw people to question what is distinctive about that person’s life as well as demystifying church activities. Gould (2013: 11) would agree that “social media has opened up yet another portal for seeing and being seen, for knowing and being known, for being in and belonging to community.”

Much media discourse around digital and social media is negative, claiming that it is all a waste of time and simply provides a space for poorly managed conflict. Within society, especially religious cultures, the Protestant work ethic has infected the discourse (van Hoorn and Maseland 2013: 10). The notion that users may be wasting time assumes that all users use it the same way and use it negatively (Goldsmith 2016). It signifies the moral panics that accompany every new technological development:

If modern people worry over whether digital electronics threaten to corrupt religious experience, their grandparents worried about the intrusion of electrical light into sacred spaces, and their great-grandparents debated the permissibility of musical instruments for worship. (Adam 2012: 5)

Adam (2012: 7) identifies that socially permissible uses of technology are for clothing, shelter, and food preparation and that any use for entertainment, comfort, and self-indulgence is deemed impermissible.

There is no doubt that online content is full of triviality but no more than in everyday conversation amidst stages of relationship formation, where surface conversation topics help establish trust, defined by McCormack (2018) as “weak ties” leading to “strong ties” amongst mountain biking communities.

Hutchings has spent significant time looking at Christian online communities. He notes that some see the internet as a threat to “real” community, to be substituted with “easier, more convenient online relationships” (2015: 151), although his research reveals that, as with radio and TV ministries, audiences remain closely tied to local churches (2014: 9). There are, however, opportunities for “deeper, more interesting, more honest, and more supportive” relationships (2015: 151). Taylor (2016: 18), a social media consultant before becoming a vicar, identifies how disinhibition, which is blamed for so much problematic online behaviour, is what allows people to ask more difficult questions online than face-to-face. Once trust has built up, users do not need to stutter, go red, or fear being trapped in a room, but find it easy and more comfortable to ask questions about faith in a private space online, with “a distance offered by the online environment akin to the screen in the confessional box.”

Within workshops that the author runs for church leaders (Lewis 2015), a standard question to pose for discussion is “If an alien landed and could only see your social media presence, what would they know about you and think is important to you?” Delegates are urged to think about what they post online, what it says about them, and what their content and shares demonstrate is important to them. They are encouraged to consider Galatians 5:22–23, and how the “fruits of the spirit” play out within the online spaces: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In many ways the course asks individuals to consider and then self-regulate their behaviour, to gain relevance by sitting comfortably within the social definition of “normal,” in the Foucauldian assumption that others may be watching them as the “face of God.”

Beaudoin (1998: 89) notes that members of an online Catholic forum “took time to word their responses carefully,” as they were aware that others were watching what they posted. Within a social media environment that requires swift responses and regular updating (Beasley and Haney 2014: 49), Byers (2013a: 232) gives a warning that “nothing would be more irrelevant to the world than a relevant church that is competent with digital media but inept with the media of God.” Within Lewis’ social media workshops, she also asks delegates to consider being “salt and light” in the digital spaces, although Christians “may have so internalised technological values and perspectives that these have become our worldview, the same worldview by which we seek to critically engage with and evaluate digital cultures” (Stoddart 2015: 30).

Social media as a space for conflict was a frequent topic of debate on The Big Bible Project, especially in terms of the lack of ability amongst Christians to manage with grace differences of opinion, especially theologically. Some have concerns about non-Christians observing these negative debates, whilst others are troubled about any push for “false unity.” As Andrews (2013) puts it “conflict isn’t a bad thing in and of itself, and instead can, under the right conditions, create an opportunity to work through differences in a constructive way,” a collaborative planning approach, but unfortunately most, as they are human, merely seek to prove that they are “right.”

Phelps-Roper (2017) is an interesting example of managing conflict online. Formerly a member of the controversial Westboro Baptist Church, she used Twitter to share the message, typically finding users “the digital version of the screaming hordes I’d been seeing at protests since I was a kid.” However, when some “friends on Twitter stopped accusing and started asking questions, I almost automatically mirrored them. Their questions gave me room to speak, but they also gave me permission to ask them questions and to truly hear their responses.” Their behaviour fundamentally changing the dynamic of their conversation challenged her thinking, and she left the church (marrying one of her Twitter respondents). Phelps-Roper has left her early conversations visible on Twitter, because she did not want to whitewash her history, with her TED talk drawing attention back to tweets that might otherwise have become invisible.

This paper has demonstrated that, within a Christian faith context, digital can contribute to personal faith formation, but also puts a missional imperative upon the relationships that Christians already have online. Those in formal roles feel the pressure of wearing a digital “dog collar” 24/7. In a 2017 Facebook conversation with another previous contributor to The Big Bible Project:

The bit I would comment on is the “people are watching.” As a curate it didn’t trouble me too much, but as a “responsible for parish” Rector I am much more aware that what I say and do is under scrutiny. I’ve stopped blogging partly because of lack of time, and partly because the situations I might blog about are easily identified by those involved, their friends, relations, and neighbours. We get enough local spats on social media without me inadvertently adding to them.

Along with every user, as the digital environment has evolved, Christians have had to learn a new etiquette, consider wisdom in what to share, and understand the capabilities of how the SNS allow them to determine who is able to see their various types of content. Conversations on The Big Bible Project demonstrated that those in formal and informal positions felt either constrained in their ability to share their lives online due to network convergence and context collapse or liberated by the need to no longer segment their lives. Returning to the Facebook conversation in Section 6, when questioned if the previous contributor regulated her online self, she said: “I am me and [it’s] become abundantly clear over the years that I can’t hide that online any more than I can in real life. I don’t pretend to be anything other than I am, warts and all, and I’ve seen that God uses it all for good.” It is evident that this user sees the digital as an opportunity to break down the boundaries between online and offline worlds. She feels a certain freedom in that, removing the “fear” of being watched, as she is living a life that she feels is authentic and open to scrutiny, using exploration to enable spiritual formation.

8. Conclusion

This paper sought to offer a contribution to theories of surveillance through an assessment of the online environment, in a case study of Christian discipleship online. Issues of surveillance in digital spheres have extra layers of complexity that need unpacking, part of which comes through the interlocking online and offline worlds in the lived experience of the individual. Social media is now a ubiquitous part of everyday life, offering users opportunities for a visible and interconnected presence online, but also greater context collapse, including between secular and religious aspects of users’ lives. The online environment, rather than flattening hierarchies, draws upon power structures pre-existent offline, including those from religious institutions. A community of practice of Christian disciples in any environment can be supportive and caring or demanding and exclusive, whilst the surveillant affordances offer the opportunity for “many to many” interactions between peers, rather than the “one to many” of the pulpit and the people.

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